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Reflective Teaching in the Context of Community

Abstract

This essay delves into the feelings of fear and self-doubt that a rookie teacher experienced her first semester as an adjunct professor and how, through reading and reflection, she was able to regain her confidence and approach the profession with renewed confidence and joy. Drawing wisdom and gleaning practical tools from Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* and Parker's *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, the author learned the value of deliberate conversations with colleagues and was reminded that she and her students are joint-learners.

KEYWORDS: affirmation, autobiographical reflection, context of community, critical incident questionnaire

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At the end of years of education—kindergarten through Ph.D.—I was supposedly ready to teach. During my education, I earned money by teaching: tutoring in high school, small group work with ESL students in college, classes on writing and church history for undergrads while doing my Ph.D. And sometimes I taught just for the pure fun of it: individual cooking classes for friends or lessons on how to drive a stick shift in my old Datsun. Now, I was done with formal education. The piece of paper that read “Ph.D.” was in my hand, and I was released into the classroom for the first time to teach college students in a field related to that piece of paper. While I had taught in various forums and styles during my years of education, the only formal training I received in teaching was an undergraduate class about teaching English to ESL students.

About a year after I finished my Ph.D., a small liberal arts college near my home hired me to teach a class on the Pentateuch while the regular professor was on sabbatical. As an adjunct, I was on campus minimally and had little regular contact with other colleagues. I took up the challenge of teaching my first college class on a subject that was of interest to me but which was not my area of expertise. The metaphor that best describes that semester is one of a sixteen week marathon combined with weekly sets of sprints as I raced to prepare material and stay steps ahead of my students. I felt that it was my duty to communicate all that I knew about the Pentateuch to the students in my class. In a short time, I myself learned far more about the first five books of the Old Testament than I had previously known, and I did my best to teach what I already knew and what I was learning to the twenty or so students in my class. Some days were breathtakingly good like the lessons on Leviticus that opened up a whole discussion about holiness in our contemporary society, and other days were . . . painful as I muddled through to the end of the hour. I finished the semester exhausted and wondering if I really was an effective teacher. Had my students grasped some of the important material that we had covered? Did I know enough about the subject to teach well? Did they have a new interest in the subject matter? Many of them were majoring in the field, did this class help them connect with other material in the field? Ultimately, I was asking had my students actually learned? It was my fear that they had not; and, more paralyzing, that I had not taught well.

After the semester was over, I was so tired and exhausted from teaching that my feeling of fear began to control me. I was afraid that my teaching had

not been good enough, that my lectures were not interesting enough, that the assignments did not help students learn. Additionally, the temporary nature of my adjunct employment left me with few safe avenues to address that fear in the context of a supportive community that valued excellent teaching. Fear obscured the experience of teaching and led to self-doubt and discouragement. Then, I picked up two books: Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* and Stephen Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. Together, these two books impacted both my thinking and practice of teaching. The first affirmed that the inner life of the teacher can be a significant part of being a good teacher and reminded me of insights I already possessed that were rooted in both my Christian faith and my years of education. The second book introduced me to a variety of tools that help me teach in a style that both represents who I am while also giving me ways to know whether or not my students are actually learning. It was significant that I read both books at the same time. Palmer renewed the sense that my vocation lay in teaching while Brookfield provided me with new understanding about how I might practice that vocation in a critical and analytical fashion.

The affirmation that the inner life of a teacher mattered just as much as the actual subject of the class was both encouraging and daunting. On the one hand, there was the confirmation that who I was was intimately connected to the task of teaching; on the other hand, there was the knowledge that I bore responsibility for my inner life and its affects on my teaching and thus, ultimately, upon my students. Just a couple of years before I began to teach that post-Ph.D. class, I had spent considerable time in reflection and conversation and had come to the decision that I could no longer allow fear to delimit my choices as it had done for some time. Yet, two years later, there I was, circumscribed by fear. It was in this context, that I began to read Parker Palmer's chapter about fear. For me, the most significant insight in that chapter was this:

Fear is so fundamental to the human condition that all the great spiritual traditions originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our lives. With different words, they all proclaim the same core message: 'Be not afraid' ... It is important to note with care what that core teaching does and does not say. 'Be not afraid' does not say that we should not *have* fears. . . Instead, it says that we do not need to *be* our fears. (Palmer, p. 57, emphasis in the original)

When I came to my current teaching position, I copied this quote and hung it on the back of my office door in a spot where I could see it every time I walked out the door headed towards a classroom. It was the reminder I needed that who I was, including the person who felt trepidation around a whole variety of issues (Was I good enough? Did I know enough? Would my students learn?) did not have to *be* those fears. In those early days of full

time teaching I found that I had many of the same feelings that I had when I taught the first post-Ph.D. class—anxiety, fear of not knowing enough, fear of being a bad teacher, fear of failure—but the time that I had spent reflecting on Palmer’s book along with the presence of a community who was rooting for me and the deep sense that I was called to this particular time and place all contributed to my ability to acknowledge that I always walked out of my office on my way to the classroom with a knot in my stomach. At the same time, those same things allowed me to channel that fear in ways that helped me grow as a teacher.

Parker Palmer goes on to talk about learning in the context of community. In particular, this involves conversation with faculty colleagues (a valuable asset I took advantage of when I took up full time teaching) and a reanalysis of the relationship of both teachers and students to the subject matter (another important reorientation). Both of these are important aspects of my teaching. In particular, I found that the new faculty orientation at Asbury Seminary gave significant attention to the practice of teaching. This included time spent planning classes, discussing classes with colleagues, and having colleagues sit in on classes and give both written and verbal feedback after their visit. An even more enlightening aspect of shared conversation around pedagogy took place when I learned how to teach online classes. This training seminar also had significant amounts of joint conversation around teaching, learning, and the nuts and bolts of what worked and did not work. Working through a syllabus or a set of assignments with another colleague has shown me a variety of things: places where I overestimate what I can do in one class (a bad tendency of mine); places where I expect more of my students than they can realistically do when they have a life outside my class; points that I’ve covered really well and information that I’ve left out or have only considered briefly. Deliberate conversation about teaching with my colleagues produces a stronger more manageable class for both myself and my students.

There are also times when the conversation with colleagues reminds me that my students already have some form of knowledge and that they bring this with them to the classroom. As I reflect back on that first post-Ph.D. class on the Pentateuch, I’m struck by how much time and effort I spent working to communicate “everything I knew” to my students, and I’m equally astonished by how little I worked to find out what my students already knew and how that fit into the course. It was so easy to forget that my students and I were joint learners. I have tried more and more over the years to put the subject in the center of the classroom. Palmer talks about a subject-centered classroom as a place that “has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and student accountable for what they say and do” (117). As a New Testament professor, the best examples of this are when students and I sit around a table with Greek New Testaments and lexicons and other

resources piled up around us and hammer out the translation for a text. This becomes particularly interesting when a Greek sentence can be translated in multiple ways and we enter into a true dialogue about the possible ways it can be translated and the reasons why one might be better than another. Those are some of the best discussions, and there are times when as a class we all come to see the text in a new light. .not the way I as the teacher saw it when I studied it on my own, but rather the way we all see it together because of our discussion and work with the text. Those are the days that I go home happy and satisfied.

But, the affirmation that the character of the teacher is an important aspect of education, the conversation with colleagues (even those who will visit my class once in a while), and the attempt to keep the subject at the center of the classroom are not enough to tell me whether or not my students are actually learning. For that, I turn to some of the ideas that I first learned when reading Stephen Brookfield's book *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. As the title suggests, Brookfield's book is about reflecting on the practice of teaching in order to be a better teacher. And, for him, this includes ways to learn whether learning has taken place among ones students.

First, Brookfield acknowledges that the tools that we use to evaluate teaching actually tell us very little about what students have learned, how they have learned it, and whether there are concrete ways to improve the learning experience. The vast majority of institutions use an anonymous multiple-choice evaluation with room for comments at the end of the semester when the teacher can do nothing to help the student learn anything further in the course. Brookfield suggests a variety of other ways that students can provide feedback to teachers throughout the semester that will help the teacher know what the students are learning. However, these are only effective if the teacher is willing to reflect on the information collected from the students and to respond to it in ways that honor the voices of students. This demands a willingness for self-evaluation, an ability for some flexibility, and an openness to change as teaching unfolds over the semester.

Both Palmer and Brookfield encourage the teacher to be self-reflective. Palmer talks about this as the examination of the inner life of the teacher. Brookfield talks about autobiographical reflection. Many teachers find a rhythm of teaching that seems to suit them and settle into it. It is most likely one that they experienced and enjoyed when they themselves were students (p. 50). It is helpful to reflect on the teaching that we ourselves experienced as we made our way through our schooling, but it can be even more helpful to reflect on learning experiences that we participate in now. Such reflection gives us the opportunity to reconnect with some of the experiences that our beginning students may have in our classrooms.

I myself took on the role of beginning student again when I recently

enrolled with my husband in a pottery class. Artistic endeavors are not my natural forte, and I found the pottery class particularly difficult. I had seen potters turn bowls, vases, and other objects on a wheel, and I thought it would be really cool to be able to do that as well. But I made a variety of discoveries when I took the class. First, throwing pots and shaping clay is not one of my natural skills. The teacher explained what we were doing with the clay step-by-step. We followed along with her as she led us through the steps. But when it came to actually shaping a bowl on the wheel, my clay flattened out, twisted, or flew off the wheel leaving me with a mess to clean up and nothing to show for my effort. I was so frustrated by my inability to complete the task that my teacher did so easily that I was close to tears. I thought about quitting the class about half-way through (only continuing because my husband wanted to go together—he turned out to be a much better potter than I). In 10 weeks of going to pottery class I only made one or two bowls on the wheel. They were short, thick, heavy, and disappointing. Reflecting on this experience as a learner helped me connect with first semester seminary students whom I was teaching. I was reminded that what seemed like perfectly clear instructions and illustrations on my part, may or may not actually help them learn the material I hoped they would learn. I was also reminded that the excitement about being in a new place and learning new material can be dampened by failure to achieve at meaningful levels. I would not have reconnected with those learning experiences and gained empathy for my students if I had not signed up for a class that was completely outside of my normal comfort zone. Long immersion in my academic field had dulled my memory of how hard it was when I began.

This autobiographical reflection on a current learning experience was an invaluable piece of connecting with my students and empathizing with their situation. But I also wanted to know what my students were learning and how they were learning it. For this, Brookfield suggests using what he calls the “Critical Incident Questionnaire” (p. 114). He suggests using it to end every class, but I generally only use it two or three times a semester. This is a very simple process. About five minutes before class is over, the teacher asks students to respond to these five questions on a sheet of paper.

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could

be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.) (Brookfield, p. 115)

The students leave their anonymous answers on a desk or chair on their way out. Because I don't use this assignment every week (or in every course I teach) I modify the questions so that students can reflect on their present experience in light of how they are experiencing the class as a whole. Getting this feedback from students several times during the semester has allowed me to understand more effectively what my students are experiencing in the classroom. This is very helpful because instead of basing my teaching solely on *my* perception of how the class is going, which is not always accurate, I can instead hear how my students themselves perceive the class.

When the class is over, I find some time before the next week to look over the responses. I've found that the sooner I look them over the easier it is to be "in tune" with what students are saying. I then sum up those responses for students at the beginning of the next class. One of my consistent experiences is that since there are a variety of students, there are a variety of preferred learning styles. Because of this, some students will write that they are very happy with their small group experiences while others will say, "I paid to hear you, not other students." The variety of comments reminds me to explain why I use different assignments and structure the class in the way that I do. The feedback can also help me realize when I've asked too much or too little of my students, when they are feeling overwhelmed and why, and what types of classroom interactions are really helping them engage with the subject matter.

Overall, I've found that the occasional use of something along the lines of Brookfield's questionnaire helps me know several things. First, whether my classroom is conducive to learning. Second, what part of the subject matter is actually engaging my students. Third, what and how they are learning. When I use these kinds of questionnaires during the semester, I find that the class is more attentive to the needs of these particular students and the particular nature of the group that we form together in this particular class (even when it is a course I've taught many times before). Of course, there are still times when I might finish the semester wondering, as I did after my first semester of post-Ph.D. teaching, whether my students learned. But I have found that teaching within the context of the seminary community and seeking to hear the voices of my students has left me wondering this far less often.

Bibliography

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HOWARD GARDNER

Theory of Multiple Intelligences

The Seven Intelligences	Definition	Exemplars
Linguistic	Sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages, and the capacity to use language to accomplish certain goals	Lawyers Speakers Writers Poets
Logical-Mathematical	Capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically	Mathematicians Logicians Scientists
Musical	Skill in the performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns	Musicians
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Using one's whole body or parts of the body (like the hand or the mouth) to solve problems or fashion products	Dancers, Actors, Athletes, Craftspersons Surgeons Mechanics
Spatial	Recognize and manipulate the patterns of wide space as well as the patterns of more confined areas	Navigators, Pilots, Sculptors, Surgeons Chess Players Graphic Artists Architects
Interpersonal	Capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people, and consequently, to work effectively with other people	Salespersons Clinicians Teachers Religious Leaders Politicians
Intrapersonal	Capacity to understand oneself, to have an effective working model of oneself—including one's own desires, fears, capacities—and to use such information effectively in regulating one's own life.	

— Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 41-43